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Abstract:

This article explores the ethical and safety implications of using dating apps as a method in ethnographic research. Drawing on my experience with this approach whilst conducting fieldwork across social and physical boundaries in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank, I explore the discomforts that arise in the process of using platforms associated with sex and romance. Attending to my own discomforts as well as those of my professional peers and my interlocutors, I make recommendations for an ethical approach to the use of dating apps as a networking tool. In the process I critique the nature of professionalism in anthropology, locating it in patriarchal and orientalist western values. I then unpack the unique affordances of and discourses around safety and dating app use, outlining where anthropologists can benefit from including these in their ethnographic practice.

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Tindering in the Field: Dating Apps, Ethnography, and Discomfort

Branwen Spector

Dating apps have revolutionised how people meet. Enabling individuals to get in contact by browsing through profiles and matching with those they find appealing, they provide a new means of networking amongst previously unknown parties. As such, these apps also revolutionised how I as an anthropologist conducted my fieldwork in a situation where physical and social barriers made making contact with local people difficult. During my research in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank (OPWB), these apps helped me meet new research participants whilst navigating some of the political and ethical complexities and discomforts of working with both Palestinian and Israeli groups. However, this unorthodox method of conducting research was received with discomfort by some members of the academic community because of the practical and ethical implications of using an app associated with sex and romance for professional purposes. These discomforts and the ethical complexities of this method are the subject of this article.

When I decided to use dating apps as a research tool, I was in the final year of a three-year fieldwork period in the OPWB and beginning to work with Israeli settlers. My research explored how both Palestinians and settlers experienced mobility in the region despite and around its numerous boundaries, barriers, and dangers. As I detail elsewhere (Spector forthcoming), I found the experience of conducting ethnographic research in Israeli settlements in the OPWB emotionally difficult because of the extreme differences in our politics. Settlers can be wary of outsider researchers and journalists who they feel misrepresent them as extremists, which made making contact and building meaningful relationships with them challenging. After many months of persevering, both online and offline, I began to be incorporated into the lives of older and first-generation settlers but not into those of younger settlers, whom I was especially interested in including in my research, particularly those working in military and security roles involved in the policing of Palestinian mobility.

Dating apps are commonly marketed as opportunities for meeting new people; some are explicitly advertised as tools for dating, others for friendship or networking (though many are commonly associated with 'hook-up culture', or the facilitation of casual sexual encounters). Profile matching for most apps is integral and bilateral, meaning that only those users who

consent to connect with each other can chat with each other.[1] These apps therefore act as something of a directory of other (presumably) single users in one's area, creating a unique hybrid space in which unknown individuals can browse each other's profiles, chat, and meet in a relatively easy manner and short space of time. Tinder and other dating apps operate through geolocation, so by selecting for users based on their distance from me to approximately within the boundary between the West Bank and Historic Palestine,[2] I was able to see the profiles of Tinder users either resident or working in the region, easily identifiable as Israeli, and match with them. These users were the younger and temporary residents of Israeli settlements whose mobilities I sought to understand, many of whom became key informants in my research.

Using dating apps for professional research, however, elicited multiple forms of discomfort for me, my interlocutors, and my professional peers. Discomfort can be understood as a (negative) affective response where 'our body thinks with pure feeling before it acts thinkingly' (Massumi 2002: 266). Associated with unease, embarrassment, or anxiety, discomfort can impact 'how we as scholars process and assign value to the content offered' (Petillo 2020: 15). Discomfort is also relative to safety, or the condition of being protected from risk, danger, and injury. Both discomfort and safety are predicated on the subject's individual identity and positionality; we can feel uncomfortable and unsafe for different reasons. In this article I speak to both discomfort and safety, acknowledging that whilst discomfort is an emotion, safety is a condition.

Dating apps also come with a discourse around user safety. Whilst imperfect, the suggested safety practices for meeting previously unknown strangers go far beyond what is often recommended to anthropologists-in-training, despite the fact that our work also often involves meeting new people. Safety is surprisingly under-theorised in the social sciences, despite the wealth of literature on how to conduct research safely (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Grimm et al. 2020; Koonings et al. 2019; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Procter and Spector 2024; Weiss et al. 2023). It was to my surprise, then, that safety discourses provided by and written about dating apps helped me conduct my research better than what my ethnographic training had prepared me for. Naturally, conducting fieldwork in the OPWB entails some specific challenges and circumstances other researchers may not be exposed to. Despite this, however, I argue that anthropologists have much to learn from dating apps.

1 The only exception is Grindr, which allows users to contact each other without matching.

2 By Historic Palestine I am referring to what is otherwise known as the state of Israel. I include Historic Palestine in an attempt to decentre accepted truths and to remind the reader of the contested nature of the land that Israel occupies.

In what follows, I reflect on what ethnographers can learn from both the scholarship on dating apps and dating apps themselves. By situating this discussion around discomfort and safety I also incorporate a critique of western practices of research and training for ethnographers that often exclude these themes because of the unease they generate. I begin by outlining my practice as an ethnographer using Tinder before attending to the ethical matters at stake in using dating apps to conduct research. For this I explore the role of intimacy in ethnographic fieldwork and in relation to dating apps, and link this to the point that anthropology continues to adhere to a western, heteronormative, and patriarchal standard of professionalism that does not universally apply to the work we do. In the second half of the article I consider the implications of using dating apps as a research method in relation to both physical and psychological safety. I conclude by making a case for the value of dating apps as an ethnographic research method and for engaging with scholarly discomfort.

Tinder for research: a user guide

Working in the OPWB and with both Palestinians and Israeli settlers comes with its own set of ethical and safety concerns and challenges (see Spector 2021). In order to understand the daily lives of both colonisers and colonised in Palestine, I spent three years learning about how both sides navigate the space of the OPWB every day, moving through different legal regimes, segregated spaces, and occupation infrastructures designed to separate the two groups. For the first two years (2015–2017) I worked with Palestinians in the Bethlehem region. In the third and final year of my fieldwork I began to work within a nearby bloc of Israeli settlements in Gush Etzion. This new field site brought both physical and psychological challenges. Accessing a settlement can expose one to being mistaken for a settler, which can be dangerous. Once inside the settlement, engaging with settlers can be difficult for personal, ethical, and political reasons, given their active role in colonising Palestinian land and their participation in colonial violence.

I began my fieldwork with settlers by using traditional ethnographic methods in an effort to meet people. This included attending local events, spending time in cafes, and, for a gruelling three months, attending women's exercise classes in a local fitness centre twice a day – the traditional ethnographic tactic of simply *being there* (Schnegg 2015). I also joined settler Facebook groups and tried the virtual equivalent of cold calling, or messaging group members at random, introducing myself and my research. Eventually I was able to build relationships with a small group of middle-aged settlers and, once vouched for by them, make friends and contacts within their network.

However, because the subject of my research largely concerned younger demographics more involved in the everyday policing of Palestinian mobility, including locally stationed security guards and soldiers, I was keen to connect with younger members of the settlement infrastructure who make up three often overlapping categories. One consists of the children of settlers who have finished high school, completed their mandatory conscription, and either joined the labour market or embarked on university study. They tend not to be permanently resident in the region as they typically remain in the urban centres of Israel/Historic Palestine. The second category comprises those who have completed their military service and taken up employment in the private security companies that employ former conscripts to guard settlements. The third category includes active conscripts, the active-duty Israeli soldiers who are stationed at the nearby Gush Etzion military base. These members of the younger demographics are impermanent residents of the OPWB, either returning to their parents' settlement homes at the weekends for the Jewish celebration of Shabbat or being present only during working hours.

It soon occurred to me that, for researchers conducting fieldwork amongst temporary, impermanent, or highly mobile populations, dating apps could offer a useful means through which to 'catch' them whilst they are temporarily in geophysical reach. I set up a Tinder profile with pictures of myself and a short explanation clearly stating that I was 'a researcher looking to conduct interviews to learn about everyday life', a common practice amongst ethnographers using dating apps to conduct research (Atienza 2018; Broeker 2024; Condie et al. 2018; Duguay 2020; Shield 2017). After I set my user preferences to search within a 14-kilometre radius,[3] for both men and women,[4] and for individuals under the age of thirty, Tinder provided me with a seemingly endless list of young settlers. Almost all of these proximate Tinder users were easily identifiable as Israeli, either by name or profile content, and I quickly matched with ninety-five male users. I greeted each of them with an invitation to consent to take part in the project (Fig. 1). Some thirty users immediately unmatched me, indicating their refusal of consent and curtailing my ability to speak to them further. Of the remaining sixty-five users, I engaged in regular conversation with nineteen.[5] Eleven of them I met in person once I was sure they understood the nature of both my work and

3 This radius was calculated in relation to the approximate distance of the settlements where I was located to the Green Line that separates Historic Palestine from the West Bank.

4 Tinder at the time of research did not allow for non-binary or alternative gender identifications. Although I selected for both male and female users, no female users consented to match with me.

5 The remaining forty-six users did not unmatch me but did not reply to my opening message seeking consent to include them in my research. They were therefore not included in the research.

my intentions. Eight of these invitations turned into useful and informative ethnographic interviews. I decided to cut contact with the other three as I did not feel confident that we had the same intentions for the meetings.

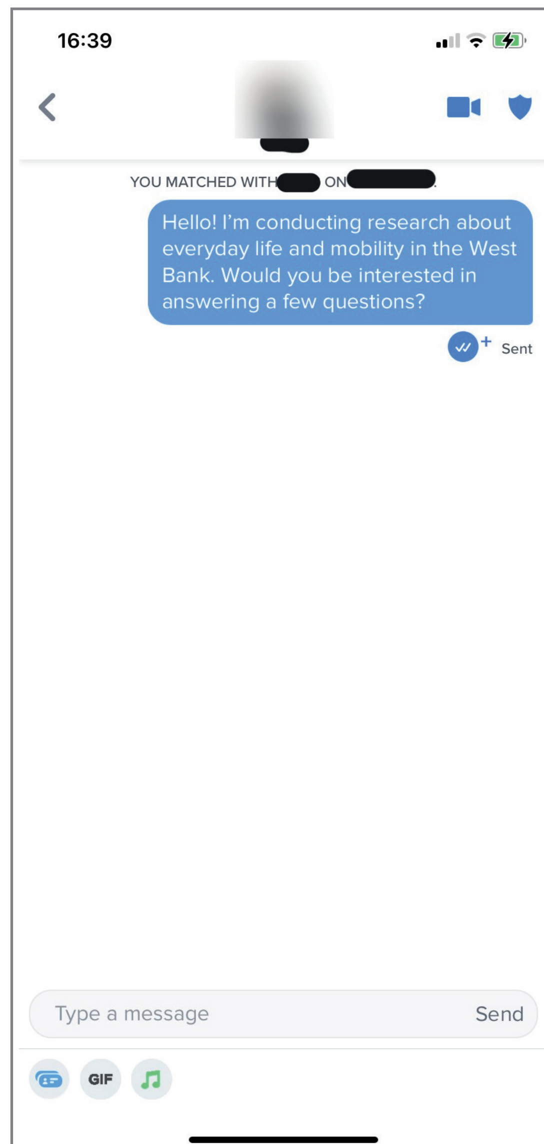

Fig. 1. Screenshot of an initial message to a Tinder match. Source: Branwen Spector, 2017

There are obvious limitations to this method (see also Spector forthcoming). Initially, using dating apps to recruit research participants is likely to yield younger and (presumably) single individuals. Tinder was, at the time of my research, heteronormative, so as a female user I only received male matches. The space of dating apps is largely one in which users seek to make romantic connections and matches are based on a dynamic of mutual attraction. Therefore, whilst I swiped right or sought to connect with every profile with-

in my preference settings, I only matched with those who presumably either read my profile or felt drawn to my profile picture.
Intersubjectivity is, then, a significant factor in how successful researchers may be when using Tinder as a networking tool in fieldwork. Paolo Sorbello (2023) discusses how his whiteness and foreign status in his field site of Kazakhstan lent itself to forming matches with users who saw him as an opportunity for social mobility. Seeing that my status as a white woman who had made a position for herself in an elite western university was central to my profile, it is possible that I was accorded a similar positive bias, although my non-Jewish name and status in the context of West Bank settlements may have worked to undo this. It is more likely that my method was successful because of a proven gender and racial bias that favours white female users of dating apps (Narr 2021), making them more likely to receive matches than users of other backgrounds. It is certain that, given the specific racial demographics of Israeli settlements[6] and the wider racialised context of the apartheid segregation regime of the OPWB, my whiteness proved favourable in making matches with the majority Ashkenazi Jewish population of the surrounding area.

In this paper I do not make the argument that dating apps are a universally applicable tool for making contacts in new field sites. I do, however, argue that dating apps are, unlike other social media platforms, inherently designed to connect previously unconnected parties to chat with each other, with 'the intention to meet offline', as Chiao-Yin Hsiao and Tawanna Dillahunt (2017: 2) note. It is now common to incorporate social media use into ethnographic fieldwork, particularly for early stage networking (Spector and Sutton 2024), but in this research project digital cold calling did not prove successful, likely because of a wariness felt towards unknown outsiders. This unique feature of dating apps makes apps like Tinder a highly useful platform through which to locate potential geographically proximate but socially remote research participants.

Discomfort, ethics, and their challenges

In the process of conducting, discussing, and publishing this work, I met both appreciation and discomfort for using dating apps as research tool. Some research participants agreed that it was a useful means to overcome boundaries of access, but others expressed their disappointment or frustration that I was subverting the use of a platform through which they sought sex or romance. Some colleagues shared bemusement and approval of the apparent legitimation of this approach, 'unofficially' used by some new ethnographers

6 Settlements tend to reflect and exacerbate pre-existing ethno-class stratifications, both between Palestinians and Israelis and within Jewish Israeli society (Tzfadia 2008).

to the field.[7] Others privately suggested that I do not publish on this subject as it may damage my reputation as an early career academic. One reviewer of an earlier iteration of this article even expressed concern beyond discomfort, stating that my method was as unethical as 'the recently retracted article from *Qualitative Research* but also the well-known discussions about anthropologist Jacques Lizot's sexual contacts with Yanomami boys and young men'.[8] This located my practice alongside paedophilic and other sexually violent and criminal acts, framing it as putting the safety of both my research participants and the reputation of the anthropological community at risk. Clearly, using Tinder as a research method elicits strong affective responses.

In this section I consider these three different discomforts: my own as anthropologist; that of my interlocutors on Tinder; and that of my peers in the anthropological community. I begin by reviewing how anthropological fieldwork is often presented as a necessary discomfort and therefore part of career progression in anthropology (Procter and Spector 2024). This idea of a necessary discomfort is problematic and violent in numerous ways (Berry et al. 2017; Cearns 2018; Freed, Procter, and Spector 2024; Pollard 2009; Procter and Spector 2024), not least because it absolves the university and the discipline of anthropology of the responsibility to care for their practitioners. I recommend strategies for managing and negotiating the discomfort of disrupting the space of dating apps for anthropological research. I also reflect on how my own subjectivity as a young white woman with British citizenship informed how I was able to make and build relationships on a platform designed for romance and intimacy amongst Jewish Israeli settlers. I then address the potential discomforts of interlocutors in experiencing this disruption, reflecting on the ways that I learnt to manage expectations and enact strict boundaries around dating app use in research. Finally, I attend to the discomforts of other anthropologists in their reception of the idea of using dating apps for ethnographic research, locating the use of an app associated with romance and sex as at odds with conceptions of professionalism in the context of the academy. Because dating apps are an under-researched area in the social sciences (Condie et al. 2017), there is limited ethical guidance for their use, particularly for accruing research participants. I therefore also summarise the advancements of the approach offered by Condie and their co-authors and present my own reflections for an ethical practice.

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7 This is evidenced by the social media engagement with my blog post on the use of Tinder as a method, which at the time was published under a pseudonym and was shared on AllegraLab's Facebook and Twitter accounts (Evans 2017).

8 Regarding the article in *Qualitative Research*, the reviewer was referring to an infamous article, now retracted, in which the anthropologist author espoused the use of masturbation over pornographic images of children as an autoethnographic research method (see Retraction Notice 2022). As regards the debate about Jacques Lizot, see, for example, Borofsky (2005).

Affective responses are sometimes non-verbal or exist as tensions, atmospheres, or private comments, and as such can be difficult to trace. As Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza (2018) notes, such responses are manifested through informal and private recommendations from supervisors, colleagues, and publishers to censor references to romantic or intimate relations in our work. Though difficult to render concrete, these responses are presented as objective and 'determine the scholarship's value' (Petillo 2020: 18). The discomfort of others holds power, particularly over more junior colleagues who are often placed in situations of precarity in the current neoliberal academic setting. The discomfort of our colleagues can hold drastic consequences for career progression, financial well-being, and the ability to coexist in the racist and oppressive structures of the neoliberal academy (McKenzie 2021). Following Wanda Pillow's (2003: 188) notion of a 'reflexivity of discomfort' that 'seeks to know whilst at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous', I too propose that we should sit 'in discomfort long enough to examine what we amplify (or should), whom we invite or exclude, and what we engage (or not) [and that this] must be part of how intersectional, feminist/queer activist ethnography does public anthropology publicly' (Petillo 2020: 21). Ultimately, these forms of discomfort around the sexual and romantic subjectivity of anthropologists (or in my case the *potential* of sexuality and romance, as I go on to show) 'might reveal truths worth wrestling with in scholarly anthropological spaces' (Petillo 2020: 14).

My first concern in using Tinder for the purposes of research was in finding an ethical way of navigating my disruption of the space of the app, commonly understood in the context of my fieldwork as one that facilitated the pursuit of sex and/or romance. Anthropological engagements with ethical considerations related to conducting participant observation in spaces where sexual activity takes place are primarily concerned with negotiating informed consent (Martin and Haller 2018; Pérez-Y-Pérez and Stanley 2011). As described above, the affordances of dating apps easily lend themselves to securing informed consent. The greater concern, for me and my interlocutors, was rather their right of privacy to use the platform.

Dating apps necessarily generate concerns over user privacy given the intimate nature of the practice for which they are designed – an issue for which Tinder has been criticised (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2021). There are, broadly, two types of privacy that users may seek to protect on encountering researchers on dating apps: institutional privacy, or the concern about how third parties will *use* personal data; and social privacy, or the control over 'who has *access* to their personal information' (Young and Quan-Haase 2013: 482, emphasis added). Amongst those Tinder users who declined to take part in my research, few explained why, many simply unmatched me following my introductory statement and request for informed consent. Those few who explained why they declined to take part in the study justified their decision

on the basis of motivation rather than privacy: they were seeking to date, and they were not interested in someone whose motivations were not romantic (Fig. 2).

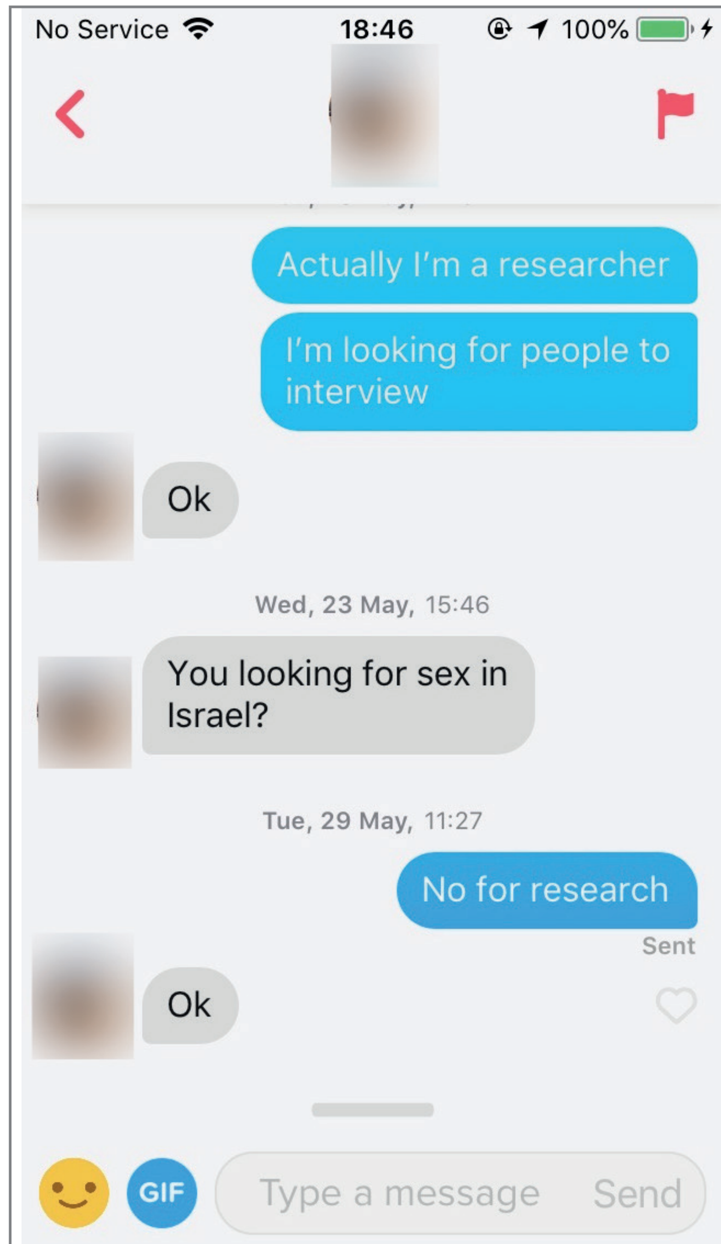

Fig. 2. Screenshot of a Tinder conversation with a settler. Source: Branwen Spector, 2017

As Jenna Condie and her colleagues note, as long as images of user profiles are not reproduced and informed consent is sought, anthropological research ethics have not been breached in this step (Condie et al. 2017). Because of the public nature of Tinder profiles (De Souza e Silva et al. 2010), Kane Race (2015) similarly argues that data collected in ethnographic studies of dating apps are ethically permissible. I add to this the point that, because of the bi-

lateral nature of Tinder (users cannot engage with each other without mutual consent), the ability to contact users is severed once one user 'unmatches' the other user, thereby retracting their permission for contact. Although I clearly identified myself as a researcher in my user profile, an improvement on this for future users of this approach could be to specify whether they are collecting data from other user profiles or only looking to network with users, as users may have concerns about data harvesting without their consent.

The appropriate treatment of users who may be motivated by romantic intentions rather than the desire to take part in research (or perhaps both) should also be considered. Although helpful, the alternative ethics framework for research using dating apps that Condie and her colleagues suggest is somewhat limited in this regard as it more closely attends to the permissibility of using user profiles and obtaining informed consent rather than the sexualised nature of the platform itself (Condie et al. 2017). This is because they take user profiles rather than interactions with users as the primary point of their study, reflecting the fact that most studies of dating apps focus on dating apps as a field of study rather than a method for networking in one's field site (with some exceptions, such as Atienza 2018; Broeker 2024; Shield 2017; Sorbello 2023).

Dating app users may be motivated by the ease of making connections, the promise of finding long-term relationships or casual sex and the excitement associated with that, and the search for validation of their self-worth (Sumter et al. 2017). Although being the subject of anthropological research is unlikely to be a consideration for dating app users, often being the subject of research can serve the need for excitement, connection, and validation (Kaspar and Landolt 2016). Indeed, some of my interlocutors openly expressed that it was interesting to see themselves through an anthropologist's eyes. Because dating apps, like ethnographic interviews, facilitate an environment where seeking information about each other's lives and lifestyles is common and encouraged, I was able to capitalise on the nature of early dating conversations to build familiarity and trust with other Tinder users, whilst reminding them of the direction and nature of my intentions.

This was aided by my making my scholarly intentions clear in my own profile, reinforced through links to my university profile, which I encouraged users to review. Sorbello (2023), who used dating apps in his field site for both professional and personal purposes, did not employ a researcher 'disclaimer' on his user profile but sent written explanations of his interests and expectations to those matches he sought to connect with as part of his research interests. Although I regularly reminded users during conversations of my presence on the app as a researcher, I found that research participants often interpreted this as a form of shyness or 'cover' for what they assumed to be underlying romantic or sexual intentions. I felt unsure of how to navigate this perceived ambiguity by the few users who would persistently pursue me

as a romantic interest, and my status as a researcher in a sexualised space became a source of discomfort to me. When I discussed this with other research participants from Tinder who had consented to take part in my research, they advised me simply to sever these relationships, much as I would have in an offline context.

Some of my professional peers received the information that I was recruiting research participants through dating apps with some discomfort, likely because of Tinder's association with sexuality and the potential of sexual encounters with research participants. This is framed as being at odds with western and heteronormative codes of academic professionalism and the reputation of the institutions to which the research is affiliated (Sanders 2006). Interestingly, Tinder is itself described as reproducing western (Toomey 2017), heteronormative (Christensen 2020), and patriarchal (Thompson 2018) behaviours, but the sexualised context places these logics into opposition to those of the professional academic workplace.

Professionalism, previously interpreted as 'an occupational or normative value', has more recently been re-interpreted as a discourse with disciplining effects (Evetts 2013: 782). This discourse is often dispensed and weaponised to reinforce internal hierarchies and protect the legitimacy of professions' claims to 'expert' status (Johnson 1992). Though Valerie Fournier writes of managerial labour which uses professionalism to 'inculcate "appropriate" work identities, conducts and practices' (cited in Evetts 2013: 786), I argue that evidence of such appropriacy also extends to the context of academia. As such, professionalism is, in a variety of contexts, linked to morality, ideals, and rules of conduct (Kultgen 1988: 5).

Professionalism is often used as a logic by which to discipline relationships both between colleagues and between colleagues and clients. However, few universities in the United Kingdom attempt to control romantic or sexual conduct between colleagues, and only sometimes between staff and students (which in any case are often breached; see, for example, Ahmed 2021; Srinivasan 2021), and hardly mention the status of PhD students (as I was at the time of this research). Similarly, codes of ethics compiled by professional associations of anthropologists – for example, the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Ethics (AAA n.d.) or the British Association of Social Anthropologists' Ethical Guidelines (ASA 2021) – make no mention of sexual or romantic relationships between anthropologists and their research participants. Despite these omissions, professionalism appears to be interpreted as opposed to sexual acts.

I remind the reader at this point that in the case of my research I am merely discussing the sexual *potential* of dating apps as a setting for research. The connection between dating apps and sex has been generated from a somewhat scandalising media discourse around the sudden seeming availability of casual sex between strangers, seen as originating from the

apps themselves (Sales 2015). Discomfort emerging from this association amongst anthropologists may be linked to the omission of our sexual subjectivities from much of our work, which is surprising given the high valuation of reflexivity within anthropology and a disciplinary fascination with the sex lives of others.[9]

This omission is also surprising given the importance placed on intimacy in our methodological practice. Ethnographers-in-training are generally advised to build intimate and kin-like relationships with our research participants as a strategy for achieving integration into and enhanced understanding of their cultures, something we might assume from the wealth of canonical ethnographic literature that presents their experience as such. At the same time, however, there is an expectation that these relations will be platonic in nature (Newton 1993: 4). This assumption is perhaps a remnant of orientalist notions of maintaining racialised boundaries between the anthropologist and the 'other' (Dubisch 1995). Certainly, the gendered, racial, and financial power dynamics in the event of sexual activity between researcher and researched can become exacerbated and problematic (see, for example, Bolton 1995). However, and as Evelyn Blackwood (1995: 82-83) notes, 'many male anthropologists, through their silence on the subject of sexuality in the field, have failed to make connections between their own privilege and power as situated (rather than unmarked) men and the very personal experience of sexual involvement'.

Sorbello (2023), writing from the field of Central and East European Studies, engages directly with his positionality when describing his use of Tinder for accruing research participants in Kazakhstan. He identifies that, for local women, matching with a foreigner may have been useful for achieving upward social mobility. In the context of the settlements where I worked, in which residents are largely observant and mostly middle-class Jews, my non-Jewish status in fact rendered me impermissible for marriage or a serious relationship – a point often reiterated to me by my Tinder matches. It is notable, however, that for women, particularly when conducting work in sexualised fields, a wider social stigma of online dating and casual sex persists (David and Cambre 2016; Duguay 2017) in a gendered fashion (Condie et al. 2018: 7). This can result in women researchers not feeling safe or comfortable to include a consideration of their sexual subjectivity in their work.

Despite these silences and stigmas, the paradox of developing intimate but platonic relationships with our research participants has been discussed in the anthropological scholarship (Atienza 2018; Kaspar and Landolt 2016; Kulick 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Newton 1993). It concludes that sexual and romantic encounters can potentially be analytically useful for the researcher's understanding of both their own subjectivity and their theoretical arguments (Atienza 2018; Kulick 1995). Speaking to dating apps more

9 See, for example, Malinowski (1929), Mead (1928), or Morgan (1907).

specifically, Jonathan Ong's (2017) study of dating app use by humanitarian workers in their host countries details the ways these encounters reinforced colonially informed power dynamics between visiting white humanitarians and locals. Race (2015) points out the relevant concerns with privilege and access for dating app users – namely access to mobile phones with internet and, for those using them with sexual intentions, to a private location in which to host the event.

The fluidity of sexualised power dynamics (Duguay 2020: 39) is also worth considering, particularly in the gendered context of dating apps. When I used Tinder, where gendered and racialised stereotypes are often drawn out and emphasised (Hess and Flores 2018; Mason 2016; Sales 2015; Shield 2017), I was interpreted with regard to local patriarchal ways of understanding and relating to single, foreign, white outsiders. I benefitted from being understood as an innocent ingenue, someone who knew nothing about Israeli and, particularly, settler life. Though I offered nothing more than an opportunity to talk about everyday life in the region, I was in part relying on gendered notions of female naivete and the informal and sometimes flirtatious nature of exchanges on the platform I was using to conduct research.

Safety first: what we can learn from dating apps

In anthropology, ethnographic research is often framed as a necessary discomfort (Berry et al. 2017; Cearns 2018; Procter and Spector 2024). This view is problematic: at best it normalises research as potentially damaging and at worst encourages researchers to place themselves in danger. Discomfort can feel unsafe or lead to the material conditions of a lack of safety. As such, discomfort as an affective response can certainly contribute to a lack of mental safety, something that is often undervalued in the process of ethnographic training (Freed, Procter, and Spector 2024). In this section I outline the ways in which, contrary to my expectations, the use of dating apps to conduct research enhanced both my physical and my mental safety in ways that western training in ethnographic methodology often does not consider.

To do this, I use the safety discourse that the rapid adoption of dating apps has generated as a source from which anthropologists might learn. These safety practices are linked to the social changes that facilitated the emergence of dating as a practice in the Global North. From the early twentieth century onwards, the cultural practice of finding a partner evolved from supervised and family-organised marriages to two adults leaving their parental homes and moving together without family supervision. This has led to individualised forms of dating that are now embedded in digital and smartphone-based technologies, which typically eschew the involvement of human third parties. The rapid adoption of dating apps that connect previously unknown individuals has also generated public discourse about the

dangers this can entail, particularly for female and LGBTQ+ users (Byron et al. 2021; Giles et al. 2022), including harassment, stalking, revenge porn, and scams (Phan et al. 2021).

Popular media (Ellen 2020; Iovine 2023) and dating app developers responded to these dangers, offering guidance and commentary on the ways in which users could stay physically and financially safe when meeting people through apps.[10] Such discourse includes recommendations such as meeting in public, alerting a friend about the date, being in control of your transportation, and leaving if you feel uncomfortable or threatened (Bumble 2024; Tinder n.d.). In the United States, Tinder has even introduced a 'panic button' feature that users can activate to alert local emergency services if they feel unsafe whilst meeting another user, a response that acknowledges the fact that meeting strangers from the internet can be a particularly unsafe practice.

Such features, however, do little to attend to other discomforts and physical and psychological threats users may experience (Gillett et al. 2022), including harassment and abuse (Gillett 2020) and receiving unwanted sexual advances (Douglass et al. 2018) and unsolicited explicit images (Giles et al. 2022). It is, of course, significant that whilst Tinder claims it has been developed with safety in mind (Friedman 2013; cf. Mason 2016: 824), its safety features and advice have been developed retrospectively. Tinder and other dating apps have also appeared reluctant to enforce more in-depth identity and criminal background checks of their users, which (amongst other reasons) are in conflict with user reluctance to provide the platforms with additional personal data, leaving 'the responsibility of cautionary use on the shoulders of their users' (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2021: 460). Although Tinder introduced a user verification method which partially reduces the risk of physical impersonation,[11] this does not limit the use of the app by those with 'fake identities, fraudulent intentions, distorted realities, or harmful practices developed on the app' (Stoicescu and Rughiniș 2021: 460). As such, the practice of meeting strangers through apps leaves users vulnerable to danger. This is evidenced by a 175% increase in police cases in the United Kingdom linked to dating apps in the five years to 2021, rising from 699 in 2017 to 1,922 in 2021 (Hardy 2023), though it is likely that this statistic also reflects the increased use and normalisation of dating apps since their introduction in 2012.

Both the mainstreaming of safety advice by dating apps and the dearth of attempts to manage the discomforts users may experience is highly relevant to anthropologists. Despite empirical similarities between many fieldwork encounters and dates – meeting a stranger outside of one's social net-

10 This includes, for example, specific pages of their websites dedicated to safety tips; see Tinder (n.d.) or Bumble (2024).

11 The verification method uses facial recognition technology to match users to the pictures they upload.

work, often in their homes or private places – fieldwork skills are often taught without consideration for researcher safety and mental health (Procter and Spector 2024). Often in ethnographic training courses, the freeform and vague aspects of the ethnographic method are emphasised at the expense of reminding researchers that their and their interlocutors' safety is paramount. Reading through Tinder's safety tips on the platform's blog shows that user safety is central (even if the responsibility for safety is located with the individual), with numerous tips reminding users of the importance of consent, protecting one's physical safety, and the freedom to leave if feeling uncomfortable. In this section I examine how anthropologists might learn from the safety guidance of Tinder and other dating apps. I divide my findings into three categories: expectation management, physical safety, and boundaries.

Expectation management with research interlocutors is not, to my knowledge, commonly discussed in ethnographic training programmes or texts beyond informed consent agreements. When building relationships with new research participants, anthropologists commonly set time limits for interactions, make clear subjects for discussion, and share information about where data will be stored and used. What is less managed, and less manageable, is what the relationship will look like. As previously discussed, relationships in ethnographic research are often blurred between professional relationships and friendship as intimacy develops.

Expectation management has, however, become paramount in dating discourse. The often-dreaded questions 'So what are you looking for?' or 'What brings you to Tinder?' are commonly asked amongst dating app users and daters offline (Arias and Punyanunt-Carter 2023). The management of expectations between me and the research participants I accrued from Tinder was achieved in part by reinforcing my intentions as professional rather than personal, both through the text on my user profile where I explained the project (with a link to my university profile page), which the participants could see before matching, and in conversations after matching. Some of my interlocutors expressed surprise at this insistence on the professional nature of our relationship, with it becoming a running joke with a few of them. Others, however, agreed it was a helpful practice, especially when they initially suspected it may be a cover for shyness.

This way of managing expectations and research relationships occurred in stark contrast to my experiences conducting research in offline contexts. Often during my fieldwork I found relationships built with research participants expanding beyond the scope of what either of us expected. In many cases this was pleasant and an appreciated privilege – becoming a driver for female friends who could not afford or did not feel safe in taxis, for example. In others, however, my presence as a young, curious, and polite female outsider in a religious and socially conservative space, operating both without a male guardian or family member to come to my defence and external to local

codes of religious morality, was mistaken for a demonstration of my sexual availability. Ultimately I had to cease a number of interactions and break off several potential research relationships, either discretely or explicitly, for my comfort at best and my safety at worst.

Yet, in such a conservative setting it would have been quite inappropriate to enter into a face-to-face relationship by stating explicitly that my presence and interest was *not* motivated by a romantic or sexual interest in the interlocutor in question. This contrasts with dating apps that, perhaps complemented by their distancing nature, allow for such crude exchanges. The chat depicted in Figure 2 is typical of numerous other early exchanges with Tinder users that set the terms of our engagement in fairly frank terms, designed to dissuade any potential research recruits of the notion that our relationship would be romantic or sexual.

Managing expectations around relationships formed on Tinder therefore offers an insight into how we might safely build research relationships formed either face-to-face or online. Although 'little evidence in terms of visible cues from others to confirm or refute expectations' (Blackwell et al. 2015: 1128) is available amongst Tinder users, the features of the platform, as I have shown, can be harnessed to make our own expectations clear. Prior to using Tinder, there were in-person meetings or research events that I had to cancel, hold in safer locations, or delay when my interlocutors misinterpreted my intent. Like many researchers, I was under pressure to complete my research, motivating me to chase any potential connection, agree to any potential meeting, or accompany research participants to locations using their modes of transport (something that Tinder and other apps explicitly advise against). As a result, I often found myself alone with strangers in dangerous situations, experiencing both discomfort and a lack of safety.

Using the safety practices recommended by Tinder, however, I felt more confident that I would be able to conduct my work without compromising my physical safety and navigate around the discomfort involved in negotiating platonic research relationships. We may not always be able to explicitly set expectations in relationships with research participants, but we can take cues from the safety discourses of dating apps to reinforce our own safety and expectations. By including expectation management into discussions around informed consent or by drawing on the safety practices recommended by Tinder, I quickly found that I was able to practice research in a way that centred on avoiding discomfort through clear communication and on mitigating the risk of finding myself in an unsafe situation.

There is a growing literature on safety in ethnographic research (Grimm et al. 2020; Koonings et al. 2019; Lee 1995; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Procter and Spector 2024). This work is a welcome departure from anthropology's implicit masculinist 'shut up and take it' attitude towards researcher safety (Berry et al. 2017) that often casts ethnographic research as a neces-

sary hardship to be endured. Researcher safety, one might understand from such an attitude, is to be sacrificed at the expense of data collection. In the context of the OPWB, safety is almost entirely predicated on one's subjectivity: my whiteness, non-Muslim dress, and British citizenship determined my ability to navigate, avoid, and challenge occupation-related violence. At the same time, however, my whiteness and female gender also made me vulnerable to gendered violence. Having spent three years conducting research in a context that required navigating the physical, gendered, and psychological dangers of life in the region, with little institutional regard for risk assessment or safeguarding training for researchers, I was surprised and pleased to find a wealth of safety discourse and, later, safety research accompanying my forays into dating apps. In fact, the guidance on physical safety in dating as suggested by Tinder (n.d.) includes advising against many activities or actions that are commonplace in ethnography: getting in strangers' cars, going to strangers' homes, or accepting invitations from people we do not know well. Such discourse includes recommendations such as meeting in public, telling a friend about the time and location of the date, being in control of one's own transportation, and leaving if you feel uncomfortable or threatened (Sales 2015).

These measures are widely employed by dating app users, as a growing body of scholarly research into safety and dating apps details (Gillett 2018, 2023; Gillett et al. 2022; Rowse et al. 2020; Thompson 2018). This research explores in greater depth the safety work, or precautionary measures, that women often carry out in public and private spaces to protect themselves from male violence (Gillett 2023: 211). As Jonathan Petrychyn and his colleagues note, dating apps reproduce existing safety concerns for users but also generate new opportunities for intimate intrusions (Petrychyn 2020) or behaviours 'women themselves perceive and/or experience as intimidating, threatening, coercive or violent' (Stanko 1985: 1), eliciting both discomfort and a lack of safety as a result. These strategies are similar to what is recommended by dating apps themselves, though with more comprehensive strategies for managing online harassment.

I employed many of these measures in my encounters with Tinder users (see Spector forthcoming). I coupled these with additional safety work done in moving through the space of the West Bank and working across political boundaries, including dressing conservatively and always relying on my own means of transport. However, the safety work described and the advice offered by both popular media and dating apps often *seems* obvious but is not *made* obvious in pre-field training curricula for ethnographers and is often at odds with how we conduct ethnographic research. As Maya Berry and her colleagues note, its inclusion is important in refusing 'the emblematic racially privileged male anthropologist and the assumptive logics of doing ethnographic fieldwork' (Berry et al. 2017: 538).

I take the conversation with David, a local settler, as an example (Fig. 3).[12]

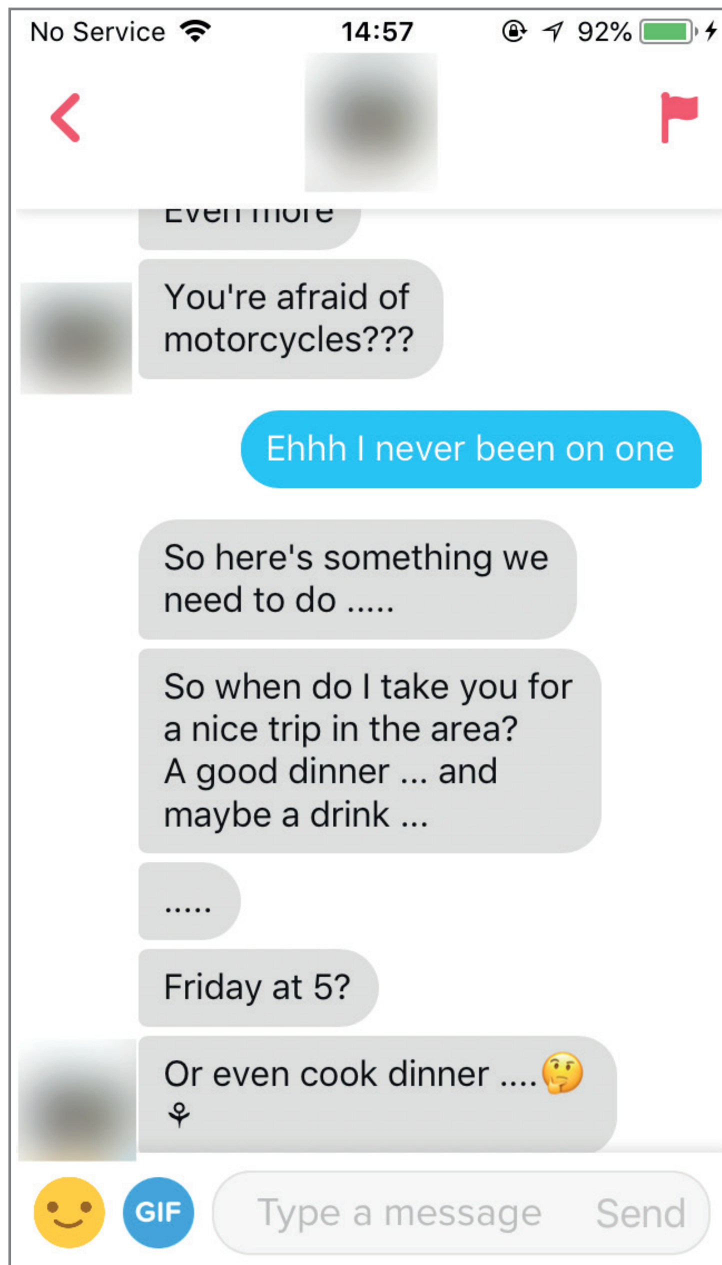

Fig. 3. Screenshot of a conversation with David on Tinder. Source: Branwen Spector, 2017

I first consider it from the perspective of the initiate ethnographer. Invitations like his are, if we are lucky, commonplace and are good opportunities to get to know the local community and setting. The additional offer of a dinner and a drink could be interpreted as platonic, but they could also be

12 All interlocutors have been anonymised and their names obscured from images and screenshots.

unwelcome flirtation (though perhaps understandable since at this point I had not yet managed David's expectations). Yet ultimately the invitation includes a visit to a local's home – the ethnographic jackpot. Had this invitation been made to me in a context outside of a dating app, it is likely that I would have accepted it. Now consider, informed by Tinder's dating safety tips, how we might interpret this as a young woman meeting in person someone she matched on a dating app. In that frame, the suggestion to meet a stranger, for the first time, alone, without the own mode of transportation, to go to several locations (including the local forest, implicit in David's meaning of 'the area'), ending up at his home to cook a meal might set off several alarm bells for a dating app user.

Applying the safety tips aimed at dating app users to my interactions with David, I declined his offer for a motorcycle tour and instead suggested we meet for coffee at a café in a local mall, informing him that our meeting would last two hours, reiterating my interest in him as a researcher, and reminding him that our meeting would not be considered a date, though I was grateful for his offer. In a happy ending to this story, David became a key informant, and we met several times to discuss his life and experiences in the Israeli settlements. I also adopted the recommended practice of keeping a friend informed about my whereabouts when meeting new research participants, despite the fact it had never occurred to me (and nor had I been advised) to do so with any other kinds of fieldwork encounters. I must note, however, that dependent on the setting, informing friends or contacts about meeting Tinder users as part of one's research activities may not be appropriate. I was able to do so because I had foreign friends who were familiar with dating apps; many of my local interlocutors and friends did not know about the existence or function of these apps and would possibly have not approved of this method of conducting research. It is also significant that Tinder's report function only works in some countries and requires collaboration from local police forces, something that may not be possible in many fieldwork contexts. Safety work is therefore required to understand how local authorities may receive victims of harassment, particularly for LGBTQ+ users.

After three years of working alone, in difficult physical conditions and across political boundaries, I was not mentally well. Adding to this was the discomfort I felt in the connections I was building with settlers, with whom I did not share political convictions and where the ambivalence I felt made it difficult for me to build meaningful relationships (see Spector forthcoming). As my incorporation into the fabric of settler life increased, I found myself both relieved that my research was proving feasible but also desperate to retreat and limit my exposure to this community whose politics I saw as so destructive towards the lives of my Palestinian friends and interlocutors. A welcome and unexpected aspect of working with Tinder allowed me to con-

trol the pace of my engagements with my research participants in ways that benefitted my health.

Initially, containing my research to a single app allowed me to apply boundaries to my exposure to settler life in ways that helped me manage my needs as they emerged. It is commonplace to migrate conversations initiated on Tinder to more personal messaging platforms like WhatsApp or iMessage (Broeker 2023). I decided to decline such invitations, for two reasons. Initially, I sought to mirror other practices of separation in my work with both Palestinians and Israeli settlers, including keeping separate Facebook accounts for communicating with each group (see Spector and Sutton 2024). I practiced this form of digital separation to limit the discomfort each group would have experienced if they learnt of my dual role in the region. Whilst I was open with Palestinian friends and interlocutors about my work amongst Israeli settlers, it remained a source of tension for some. Similarly, I knew that Israeli settlers would feel discomfort at knowing the extent of my connections with Palestinians. Opting to keep different platforms and accounts in use for different relationships with different groups became a way of navigating the potential discomforts of my interlocutors, as well as my own discomfort with crossing political boundaries. This method, however, limited the ways that my interlocutors were able to 'verify' or 'authenticate' me beyond my university page linked from my Tinder profile, and, similarly, this did not allow me to verify other users. It is acknowledged, however, that authenticity in digital research is a complex matter (Boellstorff et al. 2012), and the ways in which we present ourselves online depend on the varying affordances and environments of the different social media platforms and audiences (Spector and Sutton 2024).

Containing my interactions with settlers to Tinder also allowed me to practice digital boundary building in order to protect my health. By limiting my conversations with Tinder-using settlers to the app and adjusting both the notification settings and the hours during which I engaged with them, I was able to choose when I conducted ethnographic research on a subject I found increasingly difficult to manage (see Spector and Sutton 2024). Using dating apps, like other forms of digital ethnography, allow the pace, schedule, and intensity of communication to be controlled. By avoiding working across an ecosystem of different apps I was able both to limit exposure to this group and to keep strict working hours, avoiding conversations late at night and managing the expectations of my interlocutors about when I was able to talk with them; interviews could be scheduled or ad-hoc as user availability changed, but ultimately they were curtailed to within set working hours. Only replying to messages during the daytime and keeping our communications to Tinder also reinforced the professional nature of the relationships I was seeking to build with other Tinder users in a non-professional setting. This method proved successful in alleviating the discomfort I felt around

potentially misleading those users who I observed might have ulterior or alternative motives, allowing me to reiterate the nature of our relationship and refer back to the informed consent agreement if necessary.

Conclusion

In this article I explore the ethical and practical discomforts of conducting ethnography using dating apps for ethnographer, interlocutors, and academic community. On one hand, as an early career scholar, it can be difficult to write about discomforts that are not made explicit by colleagues or caused by the divulgence of any 'unprofessional' references to sexual subjectivity. On the other, it seems a helpful exercise to engage with discomfort as a vague and difficult-to-trace affective response by tracing it. By unpicking these numerous discomforts, I do not mean to convince all anthropologists that using Tinder is the perfect method for their future research. Rather, I hope to demonstrate some of the ethical complexities of ethnographic fieldwork as a whole whilst emphasising that we can, as scholars, respond to new technologies and the discourses they inspire to the benefit of our research.

The article also provides a series of prompts, recommendations, and considerations for those seeking to take up this practice, which I now summarise. Disrupting the space of dating apps by using them for 'off-label' or non-prescriptive uses is not a new phenomenon for users (Duguay 2020) but far more so for those few ethnographers and researchers using them to network in their field sites rather than approach them as field site itself. The ethical considerations for this type of disruption include being mindful of users' rights to data privacy, both institutional and social; being aware of how we might mislead users who use the apps with different motivations than ours; and being sensitive to the possibility of having one's own intentions misread. I also recommend managing research participant expectations explicitly and in multiple ways: in user bios, by informed consent agreements, and through chatting.

Despite the risk of being exposed to stigma when sharing research conducted in sexualised contexts (Condie et al. 2018: 7; David and Cambre 2016; Duguay 2017), researchers should not be put off from using dating apps to conduct research as long as we pay due attention to the ways in which it can inform power dynamics in the field. The dismissive attitude within the discipline also does not pay due attention to the fact that outside the context of dating apps, as Eszter Kovàcs and Arshiya Bose (2014: 116) note, 'regardless of the country, culture, or social network, relationships can become sexualized'. When conducted with consideration and care towards the well-being of our interlocutors and ourselves, attention to our sexual subjectivities can reveal powerful and analytically useful knowledge that challenges lingering patriarchal attitudes within the academy.

The safety recommendations that now accompany dating app use placethe responsibility of safety on the user rather than the app (Stoicescu and Rughiniş 2021) – much like the ethnographic training programmes many of us received (Procter and Spector 2024). The safety recommendations of dating apps may, for some, be the first encounter with direct safety advice in navigating encounters with previously unknown people. Whilst these recommendations are not universally applicable and are crafted in response to the numerous dangers app users have faced, they represent key considerations not often made clear to initiate ethnographers. Dating apps, furthermore, along with other forms of digital research, can also offer opportunities for safer and more boundaried research when needed. Consider how widely you want to interact with the wider social media ecosystems of app users and what affordances of online dating platforms may help you manage your own needs in research. As Condie and her colleagues so aptly put it, 'when the "field" is an app on your phone that is in your hand, in your home and every place else you go, the rules of research need rewriting' (Condie et al. 2018: 8).

It is worth noting that I am reflecting on the experience of conducting fieldwork in the particularly challenging environment of a region held under violent occupation, working across segregated political boundaries, and with armed and often extremist settler-occupiers. Despite these additional challenges, I do not consider it helpful to classify some field sites as inherently more 'dangerous' or 'extreme' than others; regardless of setting, fieldwork can often be dangerous, placing researchers in new and potentially risky settings, where pre-existing or known codes of conduct and safety are inapplicable or insufficient. In this article I make the case for wider theorisation on the differences between discomfort and danger and advise readers preparing for field research to consider their own understandings of the two in advance. As research by Maureen Freed, Caitlyn Procter and me shows (Freed, Procter, and Spector forthcoming), trauma-inducing violence can occur in any field site, regardless of the researcher's relation to it. The potential for discomfort and danger can emerge from seemingly mundane forms of interaction. I therefore speak to the potential of all fieldwork as necessitating rigorous and considered training, regardless of the age or career status of the researcher, and call for basic safety training that considers the distinction between discomfort and danger to be integrated into ethnographic training programmes.

It is unlikely that Tinder will be the solution for all anthropologists seeking to conduct research at a distance or expand their pool of contacts. In many cases it may be inappropriate or inadvisable or, if adopted, result in inconclusive results. What the arguments I make here show, however, is that anthropological research often requires creativity, and this creativity ought to be accompanied by considerations of how it impacts us as researchers and our research participants. Often anthropological research emphasises its location in some ethical and practical grey areas; the method is intangible and

relies on simply ‘being there’ and ‘finding out things’ through ‘talking to people’. The different technologies and ways in which we can talk to people, however, allow us to think more holistically about the ethical implications of our work and, in turn, how we might incorporate learnings from app developers and users into our own practices as anthropologists. Finally, a foray into dating apps draws vital attention to the varied forms of discomfort anthropologists and our interlocutors may face, inviting a reconsideration of what is deemed permissible and impermissible in anthropology and to whom.

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